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POLITICS AND POLICY

Lobbying Firm With Close Ties to White House Takes On Job of Boosting Marxist Angola's Image

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WASHINGTON—Gray & Co., an influential lobbying firm with close ties to the White House, is hard at work touting the deep religious feelings of its latest client.

"I was very surprised to learn that everybody (there) goes to church on Sunday," says Daniel Murphy, a retired four-star admiral who now navigates Gray's campaign for the client. What's more, says Mr. Murphy, a Gray vice chairman, "at least one-third of the Politburo members are practicing Presbyterians."

Who is the client with the Politburo full of Presbyterians that Gray & Co. is pitching for? It's the Communist government of Angola.

As a result, Washington is getting ready for round two of the Angolan public-relations wars, an expensive mixture of image-polishing and partial truths.

In round one, Jonas Savimbi, an insurgent leader battling Angola's Marxists, hired another well-connected Washington public-relations firm, Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly, which for \$600,000 made Mr. Savimbi out to be Africa's answer to George Washington. Now, the Angolans have hired Gray to counter with a campaign that will cost at least \$50,000 a month. It will feature public appearances by Angola's United Nations ambassador, congressional testimony by experts, and about anything else that might slow the drive led by U.S. conservatives to win substantial American aid for Mr. Savimbi.

Even in Washington, where unusual alliances are common, Gray & Co. and Angola are an odd couple. Robert Gray, the firm's founder, is a longtime Reagan man who was chairman of the president's first inaugural. The dapper Mr. Gray is more accustomed to rubbing elbows with Reaganites at black-tie dinners than to pitching the praises of proletarian Angola. And Mr. Murphy used to keep an eye on communists as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency and a top aide to Vice President George Bush.



Daniel Murphy

Taking the Other Side

But now, Gray & Co. is pitted against the administration, which recently approved spending as much as \$15 million on covert military aid for Mr. Savimbi's forces.

The firm's efforts have infuriated right-wingers, who charge that Gray is turning "pink."

"If these were more sensible times, this kind of activity would lead to a trial for treason," grouses Howard Phillips, chairman of the Conservative Caucus.

Adm. Murphy, who spent 35 years in the Navy, says all he is doing is engaging communism in a different theater. "Although a lot of cynics would laugh, there is a way to wear away a Marxist government from the Soviet camp," he insists, without "poking the (Soviet) bear with a big stick to see him growl." Bringing Angola and the West closer together "is something I would hope we'd help accomplish," he says.

The firm began this crusade about a month ago by giving some television coaching to Ismael Gaspar-Martins, Angola's minister of foreign trade, before his joint appearance with Mr. Savimbi on the "MacNeil Lehrer Newshour" program. Gray & Co.'s media experts advised Mr. Gaspar-Martins to wear a conservative suit and tie to contrast with Mr. Savimbi's preference for Third World-style Nehru suits, and to keep making a few basic points regardless of the questions.

Foe Called 'Terrorist'

Mr. Gaspar-Martins performed well. He told American viewers that Mr. Savimbi was a "terrorist" and then agreed with Secretary of State George Shultz that it is correct to combat terrorism. He also stressed Mr. Savimbi's links with South Africa's white-ruled government, which aids the rebel leader.

Angola is so eager to polish its image in the U.S. that it didn't want to wait until a 12-month contract with Gray could be signed in the Angolan capital of Luanda and returned to Washington. Thus, in January a one-month, \$20,000 agreement was signed here by Gray and John Sassi, an American consultant acting on behalf of

Angola, to begin work immediately on the account.

Mr. Sassi was employed for 20 years, until last June, by Gulf Corp., the Chevron Corp. subsidiary that owns a huge oil facility jointly with Angola. Gulf has been the target of both Mr. Savimbi, who threatens to blow up the facility, and U.S. conservatives, who want to boycott the company because its huge royalty payments help Angola pay for the war against Mr. Savimbi. Mr. Sassi insists that Gulf has "absolutely nothing" to do with the \$20,000 contract, that he will be repaid by Angola and that Gulf money isn't being funneled through his consulting firm to help promote Angola's image.

"I have absolutely no ties with Gulf," he asserts. He says he is negotiating his own contract with Angola to supplement Gray's image-building efforts.

At the same time, efforts are under way to undercut Mr. Savimbi's image. Mr. Sassi, for example, tells a reporter that he thinks the Angolan insurgent leader—who likes to call himself Dr. Savimbi—may be lying about his academic credentials. (A State Department analyst, however, confirms that Mr. Savimbi received a doctor of philosophy degree from Lausanne University in Switzerland, where he wrote a dissertation titled "The Implications of Yalta for the Third World.")

U.S. analysts concede that the Angolans are more ideologically flexible than many other Marxist regimes. Angola welcomes the benefits of Western commerce and technology; church attendance in the country is widespread; and many Angolans were educated by Christian missionaries.

Nevertheless, Angola isn't an enlightened democracy. The government is buttressed by the presence of more than 30,000 Cuban troops, and press freedom and the right to travel are tightly controlled. Moreover, the State Department's 1985 human rights report says the Angolan government "emphasizes the importance of propagating 'atheism' and has been critical of religious activities." Recently, the Angolan army has been bringing in truckloads of teenage boys and forcing them to serve in the military, one analyst says.

As Mr. Murphy puts it, "Their image problem is that they're a bunch of communists who have a bunch of Cubans there."